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AUTHOR White, Arden; Hernandez, Nelda R.
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ABSTRACT

Two samples of doctoral program participants were surveyed for opinions about factors of relative importance in their selection of a counselor education program. Replies came from a national stratified sample of 55 programs comprising 249 recent doctoral degree graduates plus a second sample consisting of 211 doctoral program entrants. Data were compared with a previous study of master's level students. The survey found that availability of a program specialty was highest in overall importance, and more so for doctoral than master's applicants. Program and institution reputation were very prominent. Psychologist licensure was a significant issue. Other topics of relative importance included perceived faculty philosophy, approachability, and reputation. Community size, faculty publication reputation, offer of financial support, and acceptance of transfer credit were among the least important influences. Includes 10 references. (Author/JDD)

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INFLUENCES AND PREFERENCES AMONG DOCTORAL APPLICANTS WHEN SELECTING A COUNSELOR EDUCATION PROGRAM

Arden White and Nelda R. Hernandez

Arden White is a professor of counselor education at the University of Wyoming, Laramie

Nelda R. Hernandez is on staff in the Office of Graduate Studfies and Research, College of Education, the University of Wyoming, Laramie

Addresses: P. O. Box 3374
University Station
Laramie, WY 82071

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Title: Influences and preferences among doctoral applicants when selecting a counselor education program.

Abstract

Two samples of doctoral program participants were surveyed for opinions about factors of relative importance in their selection of a program. Replies came from a national stratified random sample of 55 counselor education programs. Data were compared with a previous study of master's level students.

Availability of a program specialty was highest in over-all importance, and more so for doctoral than master's applicants. Program and institution reputation were very prominent. Psychologist licensure was a significant issue, and more so in the 1987 sample than in the 1985 sample.

Other topics of relative importance included perceived faculty philosophy, approachability, and reputation. Community size, faculty publication reputation, an offer of financial support, and acceptance of transfer credit were among the least important influences.

INFLUENCES AND PREFERENCES AMONG DOCTORAL APPLICANTS WHEN SELECTING A COUNSELOR EDUCATION PROGRAM

Contrasted with the extensive literature about the undergraduate decision process, very little research has been done about the choice of a graduate program (Malaney, 1987; Olson, 1985; Olson & King, 1985). Several reasons have been given in the literature, including the belief that good undergraduates volunteer for graduate study and, therefore, need not be recruited (Olson, 1985); the reluctance of academicians to recruit or "market" their programs (Malaney, 1987), a function carried out by institutional administrators for undergraduate programs; and, until recently, an adequate supply of applicants (Turcotte, 1983).

Recently, however, changes in the perception of a graduate degree as a natural extension of the good student's education, and in the economic feasibility and appeal of getting such a degree, have effected changes in the supply of applicants. The move toward greater accountability and an increasing awareness of the need to make the best possible use of institutional resources may well outweigh or override an academic department's reluctance to participate in recruitment. Recruitment issues aside, an awareness of the "market trends" can be useful in curriculum planning and resource management.

The purpose in the study reported here was to examine the relative personal, institutional and program influences in the decision process of a relatively homogeneous sample of doctoral students.

Procedures

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted and modified from the study by White (1985) of master's program applicants. Directions, response options, and 25 of the scaled items were identical. Nine more scaled items were replacements or additions intended to tap factors specific to doctoral program selection. Five open-ended items were the same, which afforded further but less structured comparisons between the two data sets. The 34 scaled items, somewhat abbreviated, appear in Table 1, each on an 11-point scale: no influence = 0, or influence from very little = 1, to very much = 10.

Sample

Two stratified random samples were planned to get as representative data as volunteer response procedures can yield. For the first sample, the doctoral programs listed in the fifth edition of the directory of programs by Hollis and Wantz (1983) were identified for three descriptors: doctoral degree(s) offered, full-time equivalent faculty size, and location of institution by estimated population in the area. The 130 units

reported in the directory were classified into groups involving three categories of degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D. only, or both), faculty size (six or fewer full-time equivalent, or more than six—the median size for doctoral program faculty being between six and seven), and location (population area more or less than about 500,000). A 50% random sample was taken of the institutions thus classified, with no more than one program from any one institution included. Alternates were selected for each group, as well.

Chairpersons of selected programs were asked to supply the names and current addresses of eight recent doctoral degree graduates. To maintain adequate group sizes, alternate programs were used to replace those programs for which the chairperson either reported no recent graduates or declined to participate. After one follow-up mailing, 42 lists were received containing from one to eight names each. These persons were sent an invitation to participate. The questionnaire was enclosed with a stamped envelope addressed to a colleague who had agreed to remove the personal code, arrange the follow-up list, and note those who wished a summary of the results. After one follow-up mailing, 249 usable replies (87.3%) were returned. Response percentages by institution ranged between 60% (one program) and 100% (16 programs). Percentages of program groups on the stratification variables

ranged between 85.6% and 89.6% indicating actual replies were quite representative of programs listed in the directory. Data from this sample were collected in 1985 and preliminary analyses were completed.

A major limitation in this first sample is that experiences in earning the degree might have blurred or modified recollections of relative influences at the time of application. Using the same procedures in 1987, data were collected from a second sample, this time made up of new entrants into doctoral programs in 37 departments selected from the original pool of programs. Replies were received from 211 of 286 persons contacted (73.7%) without a follow-up, making the total sample 460 (80.7% of persons who apparently received the questionnaire).

Data Analyses

Medians and means reported in Table 1 are from the 11-category scale, with "No" entered as zero. These descriptive data constitute the major findings in the study. The initial tally of the data showed that responses to many items were highly skewed, with the majority of responses clustered at one end of the scale or the other, or in some cases, somewhat unequally divided between the two ends of the scale. Large differences between some median and mean pairs illustrate this aspect of the data, as shown in Table 1.

To test comparisons among sample sub-groups, three statistical procedures were used. One ANOVA was done with the 11-category scale. A second ANOVA and a Chi-square analysis were done on collapsed data: "No," 1, and 2 = 1; 3 through 7 = 2; and 8, 9, and 10 = 3. This choice was based on the fact that, for those items with responses clustered at both ends of the scale, too few responses occurred in the middle values to support more than three cells without fringing on having too many cells with an expected value less than five or having any cells with no observations.

Because of the extreme departure from normality of the data, only results having both F-ratios and the Chi-square significant beyond .01 were deemed a likely true, and important, difference.

Findings

Doctoral Sample

Pooled data. Table 1 contains the basic summary data for the 34 scaled items for the combined doctoral samples. Rank order values for both means and medians were entered to facilitate interpretation and discussion. Aggregate responses to the items produced three sub-sets of 12, 10, and 12 items each. The 12 items with the highest medians and means contain two items that clearly were regarded as most important, and 10 more that are rather homogeneous in overall importance. In a

similar manner, the lowest 12 items quite clearly separate from the middle 10.

Insert Table 1 about here

A desired specialty was very important to most members of the sample, as was availability of courses wanted. Responses to both items produced a very substantial "reversed L" distribution (the "10" side of the scale being the vertical "leg" of the distribution), indicating the high global importance of curriculum.

Academic reputation of the institution was ranked third both in median and mean values. Coupled with the relatively high ranking of department overall reputation, whatever goes into the perception of reputation must be regarded as very important, and a major component in the "attraction profile" or recruitment advantage or disadvantage a program has. This finding tends to be in agreement with a national sample of graduate school representatives who believed that reputation of academic programs was the number one reason persons applied to their programs (Turcotte, 1983). A small sample of college seniors also ranked perceptions of program quality and institutional prestige as most important (Hartnett, 1979). Hartnett also noted that for graduate school applicants

generally, the three or four uppermost criteria are perceptions of specific program quality, institutional prestige, and curricular emphasis. Goodyear, Lichtenberg, and Robyak (1987) reported the importance of faculty and program reputation among enrollees in counseling psychology programs, third in a set of eleven. For this one curriculum group, accreditation status was most important, and geographical location was second but virtually the same in magnitude as reputation. Application emphasis of the program, perhaps similar to faculty philosophy here, was a close fourth.

Responses to these global reputation items were much in contrast to those made to the more specific, narrower reputation items. Faculty publication reputation was ranked among the lowest one-third of the 34 items. Teaching reputation median and mean values placed this item in the middle third with rank orders of 13 and 15. Friendliness reputation was marked somewhat higher, and mentoring reputation somewhat lower, as was reputation of graduates. The importance of faculty contacts, ranked in the middle of the top one-third, must not be overlooked. In-person encounters with faculty very likely confirm or disconfirm other reputation-related information the person has acquired. Faculty contacts were rated much more highly than contacts with either current students or graduates.

Geographic location was the last item in the upper one-third. Graduate school representatives in an earlier study (Turcotte, 1983) gave this factor an even higher ranking as leading to enrollment of accepted applicants. This factor, about which faculty can do nothing, is nevertheless a major contributor to the decision to apply. Hartnett (1979) noted that even among persons who apply to several programs, most of them apply at institutions within a relatively small geographic area. Olson and King (1985) collected 303 responses from graduate students at a midwestern, doctoral degree-granting university. For that group, geographic location was the most important influence in the initial decision to consider that institution. Personal contact with faculty was second, followed by department reputation, and then cost.

Malaney (1987) collected data from 1,073 newly enrolled graduate students, also at one large midwestern university. Good departmental academic reputation was listed as most influential, followed by financial and location factors. In general, the findings from these two studies are somewhat similar to the responses supplied by counselor education doctoral students and graduates. Among counselor education persons, an offer of financial support was rated in the lowest one-third in importance, which tended to support graduate school representatives who believed the level of financial

support is not very influential in stimulating either applications or enrollments (Turcotte, 1983).

Placement of graduates apparently was regarded as of minor importance in making a decision to apply, and to enroll. Two global items about community aspects also suggest applicants focus primarily on departmental and institutional factors, perhaps because they anticipate little involvement with the community while they are earning the degree. For them, the community of significance is the institution as a learning environment, and the department as the inter-personal vehicle of central importance.

Comparisons between doctoral samples. Comparisons between responses of graduates (1985 sample) and beginning students (1987 sample) produced two substantial differences, and seven of lesser magnitude. Eight of these nine items were marked by the beginning students as having been of more influence. The item that produced the largest difference, significant in all analyses at .001 or beyond, was the importance of the program as an avenue to psychologist licensure. Apparently a greater proportion of the second sample regarded licensure as a significant aspect of earning a doctoral degree. This finding is supported by the finding by White and Hernandez (1988) that chairpersons of counselor education departments recently indicated that licensure was increasing in importance and would continue to do so at least into the early 1990s.

A second, apparently real, difference between the two groups was a greater emphasis on placement of graduates by the 1987 sample, even though the item was in the lowest third of all items, as it was for the first sample. Perhaps the first sample, being involved in post-degree activities, did not recall their sense of the importance of placement. Or, a "market" change may have occurred in the time between when the first sample began their program and when the new sample started, about a five to six year time difference.

The one item perceived as more important by the first sample, the opportunity to take courses on a part-time basis, has no transparent explanation. It could be one of those random differences, but 53% of the second sample marked this item as having no bearing on their decisions, contrasted with 39% in the first sample.

One other difference may be of interest. Faculty publication reputation was regarded about one scale unit higher by newly admitted students than by graduates. In both groups, however, this item was in the middle of the lowest third of all items and carried mean and median values less than 4.00 in both samples.

The other items marginally different between the two groups, all marked somewhat more important by new entrants, were attractiveness of learning and social environments, institution and community size, and an offer of financial support. This

last difference may be due to increasing costs of doctoral study not matched by opportunities to accumulate the required financial resources, coupled with the preference to be a full-time student.

Comparisons with Master's Study

Twenty-five of the scaled items were identical between this study and data collected in 1984 from 291 master's graduates (White, 1985). Rank order correlations of +0.62 between ranks of medians and +0.74 between ranks of means show substantial agreement in relative influence among these factors upon the program selection decision. Four items—employment nearby, courses part-time, closeness of family and friends, and geographic location—produced differences that, taken together, suggest that most doctoral persons are considerably less geographically restricted, or more willing to absorb the costs to relocate for study. The doctoral samples also indicated more influence than did master's students for perceptions of faculty characteristics: wanting to work with this faculty, their philosophy, and their publication reputation. Doctoral people were more influenced by an offer of financial support, which probably contributed to their greater mobility.

Master's study respondents placed more weight on talks with graduates, probably master's degree recipients, than did the doctoral respondents. Doctoral people placed more weight on

talks with currently enrolled students, probably those in doctoral programs, just as they did talks with faculty. Both interactions may have occurred during on-campus visits. Overall, people seeking a doctoral program appear to use somewhat different sources of information and to weight others differently compared to master's seekers.

Almost all doctoral departments also support one or more master's programs. Overall similarities between degree seekers at the two levels therefore are important in attracting applicants at both levels. Global institutional and department reputations, abstract and diffuse as these factors may be, were so highly rated by both groups that these aspects, along with having programmatic specializations of interest, appear to be crucial common elements in enrollment maintenance.

Comparisons Among Classification Groups

When responses to the 34 items were grouped by the two categories of "location," essentially community size, one item was significant beyond .01 in all three analyses. Persons in programs located in the larger communities rated taking courses part-time more highly than those associated with programs in smaller communities. A second item was significant on two analyses ($p < .01$) and almost so ($p = .018$) on the third. Offers of financial assistance evidently encouraged some people to enroll in programs in the smaller communities.

With programs grouped by degree offered, differences significant on all three analyses appeared on two items. Academic reputation was rated more highly if the Ph.D. or both degrees were offered than if only the Ed.D. was granted. Programs offering the Ed.D. or both degrees had a curriculum with courses wanted by students more than did the Ph.D.-only programs. Perhaps Ph.D. programs were presumed to have a more set curriculum circumscribed by APA counseling psychology guidelines. A third item had two of the results significant at .01, and the third almost so ($p = .027$). Apparently cost was perceived as less of a factor at the Ed.D.-only institutions, making these programs more attractive to some program seekers.

When programs were grouped by faculty size, three items yielded a clear set of significant differences. Department reputation was marked more highly by people associated with the larger departments, as were philosophical orientation and faculty publication reputation. Two other items showed a significant separation from two of the three analyses, and almost so on the third. Both of these items—placement of graduates and the program being an avenue to psychology licensure—also favored the programs with larger faculties.

Several open-ended questions were asked, where the respondent could supply a number (such as how many institutions were contacted for information), a phrase (mention of a program aspect of special importance, such as licensure), or a list

(such as criteria one would suggest now as most important, after having been through the selection process). Chi-square analyses were performed using counts of responses by categories arrived at after seeing the data, necessary to avoid cells with too few frequencies. This after-the-fact procedure makes caution in interpretation quite necessary.

Half of the respondents contacted three or fewer programs, and 67% contacted five or fewer, consistent with Hartnett's (1979) discussion of application frequencies. Among the counseling psychology sample gathered by Goodyear et al. (1987), 52% applied to three or fewer programs. The extreme experience here was one person who claimed contacting 115 programs. One significant comparison ($p < .01$) involved frequencies of programs contacted. People who enrolled in programs offering only the Ed.D. contacted fewer programs. The data from counselor education students support Hartnett's (1979) conclusion that most people who actually apply seriously consider only one or two institutions.

Frequencies of mention of licensure as a factor considered during the program search and selection process were tallied and comparisons made with program characteristics. The comparison with degree(s) offered produced a chi-square significant beyond .01. People who entered a program offering the Ed.D. mentioned licensure significantly less often than did people who entered the other programs. Licensure clearly is

increasingly important as a differentiating characteristic among programs preparing people for counseling-related occupational alternatives at the doctoral level.

One other intra-sample difference may be notable. Respondents were asked to list criteria they believed in retrospect would be most important for a person to consider in doing a search for a doctoral program. People who had entered a program offering the Ed.D. degree listed fewer criteria as being of most importance. Perhaps their requirements were less diverse, or complex, though not necessarily less acute, thus making these programs more attractive.

A set of comparisons that did not yield a difference perhaps should be mentioned. Career objective was tallied for all respondents who made a clear statement. When more than one objective was mentioned, the first listed was tallied as the primary preference or intention. Private practice (41.3%) was the most frequently mentioned. Oddly, counselor education (18.7%), community counseling (11.4%), and student personnel services (11.2%) together equaled this same percentage. "Other" (14.5%) and none listed (2.9%) were the other two categories. If these percentages continue, will four out of ten doctoral graduates from counseling preparation programs find or be able to build a sufficiently active private practice? Comparisons of the frequencies in these categories with the categories for degree offered, institution location by

community size, and faculty size produced no significant separations. Apparently, people who aspire to a private practice do not select programs on the basis of these variables.

Concluding Remarks

Several of the findings probably confirm what most faculty and graduates already know, or assume. The importance of a supportive faculty-student climate is clearly very important. Another is the availability of courses and specialty curricula.

Of the several findings, perhaps the one having the most compelling concern for many doctoral programs is whether the curriculum should be an avenue to psychologist licensure. The fact that almost four out of ten respondents in this broad-based sample indicated that their primary objective was private practice may be significant by itself. Programs that are not seeking to be an avenue to psychologist licensure may have to discover or emphasize a distinctively different character and curriculum.

Planned recruitment, built around well expressed statements of curricular emphases and faculty philosophy, consistent with department reputation, may be necessary to attract applicants to programs that are not generic vehicles toward licensure. A deliberate "marketing" approach may be required (Olson, 1985),

including efforts at attaining greater race and sex diversity (Cowell, 1985).

Institutional and department reputation, global and non-specific as these factors may be, and not easily parsed for understanding or directly improved upon, appear nevertheless to be pervasive factors that lead to inquiries, application, and finally actual enrollment. Can these factors be systematically studied and brought under better control for better management of enrollments and utilization of institutional, departmental, and individual faculty resources?

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Table 1

Values and rank order of median and mean, with standard deviation, for 34 questionnaire items computed from 11-point scale data.

	Computed Values			Rank Order	
Brief of Item	Mdn	Mean	s.d.	Mdn	Mean
Sub-set One					
Specialty wanted was available	9.100	7.552	3.306	1	1
Courses wanted were available	8.253	7.205	3.127	2	2
Institution academic reputation	7.837	7.078	2.957	3	3
Avenue to psychology licensure	7.660	5.874	4.128	4	12
Talks with faculty	7.598	6.444	3.344	5	6
Department reputation	7.549	6.775	2.900	6	4
Faculty philosophy	7.506	6.521	3.146	7	5
Likelihood of being accepted	7.441	5.980	3.469	8	11
Distance from where living	7.389	6.065	3.904	9	9
Faculty professional attitude	7.073	6.105	3.332	10	7
Faculty friendliness reputation	7.071	6.087	3.309	11	8
Geographical location	7.042	6.015	3.565	12	10
Sub-set Two					
Faculty teaching reputation	6.314	5.516	3.269	13	15
Attractive learning environment	6.310	5.573	3.307	14	14
Cost: tuition, housing, etc.	6.273	5.574	3.578	15	13
Size: student/faculty ratio	6.244	5.283	3.332	16	18
Library; learning resources	6.171	5.327	3.334	17	16
Proximity to family/friends	6.117	5.298	4.041	18	17
Faculty mentoring reputation	5.972	5.275	3.645	19	19
Wished to work with this faculty	5.756	5.009	3.655	20	20
Reputation of graduates	5.583	4.785	3.486	21	21
Talks with current students	5.100	4.513	3.552	22	22

Table 1 (Continued)

	Computed Values			Rank Order	
Brief of Item	Mdn	Mean	s.d.	Mdn	Mean
Sub-set Three					
Community resources	3.821	3.832	3.523	23	28
Placement of graduates	3.804	3.861	3.416	24	26
Institution size	3.646	3.852	3.345	25	27
Attractive social environment	3.103	3.514	3.266	26	32
Faculty active prof. organizations	3.083	3.538	3.264	27	31
Faculty publication reputation	3.000	3.330	3.081	28	33
Talks with graduates	2.750	3.564	3.558	29	30
Offer of financial support	2.200	4.112	4.249	30	24
Take courses part-time	1.833	4.117	4.332	31	23
Community size	1.429	2.865	3.146	32	34
Accepted transfer courses	1.380	3.570	3.947	33	29
Was employed in the area	1.056	3.891	4.284	34	25